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UNCLAS SENSITIVE KUWAIT 04552

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ACTION: POL
INFO: OMC OMCOPS DCM DIALO DUTYOFCR FCS AMB PAS ECON
CONS POLMIL

DISSEMINATION: POLX

CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: AMB:RLEBARON

DRAFTED: POL:CCNICOLAIDIS

CLEARED: POL:NEBROWN POL:JPORTO PAO:MSTROH

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6193

INFO RUEHVV/ISLAMIC CONFERENCE COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 004552

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL KISL SCUL ECON KU

SUBJECT: KUWAITIS CONFLICTED OVER CHRISTMAS

¶1. (U) This message is Sensitive But Unclassified; Please Protect Accordingly.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: While some of Kuwait's western educated elite dabble in decorating Christmas trees and exchanging presents, and Christians openly celebrate the holiday, some Islamists have called for banning the sale of Christmas-related goods and some have scolded Muslims for "congratulating Jewish and Christian apostates and others on their festivals and holidays." The diverse reactions to a holiday celebrated by many residents here reflect the relative freedom enjoyed by Kuwait's population -- in this case to both commemorate and criticize the commemoration of a non-Muslim holiday. End Summary.

It's Christmas for Kuwaitis, Too

¶3. (U) To visit one of Kuwait's many shopping malls during the Christmas holiday season is to transport yourself back to the United States. Christmas trees adorn many shops, the likeness of Santa Claus is unavoidably plastered throughout buildings and traditional (and remarkably religious) holiday tunes play in the background. Although one might think the target audience of these decorations and adornments is Kuwait's large population of expatriate Christians (approx. 250,000 - 500,000) -- and in fact this is partially true -- there are many Muslim Kuwaitis who have adopted the Christian holiday and embraced its commercial, if not religious aspects. Accordingly, scores of Kuwaitis, most of them educated in the West, put up Christmas trees, buy their children Christmas presents, host lavish parties and send holiday greetings to their Christian friends. Newspapers are also filled with inserts urging shopping and dining at the many retail outlets and restaurants scattered about the city.

The Islamists Who Stole Christmas

¶4. (U) But venture outside the malls and Kuwait City proper

and one will find little public acknowledgement of any non-Muslim holiday; in places where Kuwait's bedouin and tribal populations are centered -- Jahra, Ahmadi, and other outlying regions, the influence of Islamists is increasingly apparent. The influence is manifested not only in dress and custom -- more men wearing long beards and more covered women -- but has also affected what merchants are allowed to sell. On December 23, according to local dailies, a group of Salafi Islamists forced a well-known supermarket to withdraw such products as trees and greeting cards from its shelves in its Jahra store, claiming that holiday items connected to Christmas and the New Year celebration were contrary to Islamic teachings. The group reportedly produced a petition with 350 signatures demanding the withdrawal and explaining that such goods were 'haram.'

¶15. (U) Additionally, well known Salafis have called on Muslims to refrain from congratulating Jews and Christians on their holidays. The Chairman of Revival of Islamic Heritage Society's (RIHS) Good Word Committee (Note: RIHS is the charitable and social welfare arm of the Traditional Salafis), Khaled Al-Sultan Al-Issa announced in the Kuwaiti arabic daily 'Al-Qabas' on December 26 that "Muslims (are) forbidden from imitating others in everything, even involvement in the festivals and holidays of non-Muslims." Reinforcing his message, he went on to characterize the beliefs underlying these holidays as "creeds which are openly incompatible with the Islamic creed...Muslims are prohibited from sharing the Christians' and other infidel faiths holidays in any form, whether by attendance or exchange of gifts or expression of joy."

¶16. (SBU) Anecdotally, a Muslim contact of Polchief's was stopped by the police for displaying Christmas ornaments in the back window of his car. Upon being scolded by the officer for "promoting a Christian holiday," he claimed he was Christian, which immediately ended the harrassment.

Kuwaiti Liberals: 'Tis The Season...

¶17. (U) Despite protestations over Christmas by many Islamists, the vast majority of Kuwaitis -- who are Muslim -- are tolerant of the celebration. Moderate, independent columnist Mohammed Musaed Al-Saleh wrote in Al-Qabas on December 27 that the forced removal of Christmas items from the Jahra store was conducted by "narrow-minded people" who have committed a "violation" against the state ministries charged with regulating commerce. He finished by wishing a "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to our Christian brothers." Columnist Khaled Al-Jenfawi agreed, noting that "the relevant people neither represent the authorities concerned in the country nor the citizens in Al-Jahra Governorate." Lamenting the general loss of civility towards Christians during the Christmas season since the 1970s, Khaled Bourisly fondly recalled a previous time when he and his Kuwaiti friends openly celebrated Christmas with their Christian friends. In a December 25 Special to the english language Arab Times, he noted that "foreign elements" began to influence Kuwaiti society in the late 1970s. As a result, "all sorts of freedoms began to be restricted, including public singing and celebrations -- and Christmas and New Year's parties -- were limited or forbidden...In the suppression of Christian holiday celebrations, Kuwaitis and their children are the real losers." Finally, outspoken Shiite cleric Sayed Mohammed Baqr Al-Mohri, likely reacting to the remarks of Khaled Sultan, reiterated that there is no religious prohibition against congratulating those of other faiths on their holidays.

¶18. (SBU) Comment: That most are free to celebrate their religious holidays within limits is a credit to the relative openness and freedom enjoyed in Kuwait, in contrast to many of its neighbors. Part of that freedom may be economic in nature, as holiday items, none of which were on sale -- generated nice profits for many retailers. History, however, shows that the path from denouncing other religious celebrations to prohibiting them is very short. Whether

Kuwait takes this path is part of the broader Kuwaiti societal debate between those who view the West as an example and those who reject it as un-Islamic. For the time being, the fact that there are public debates about this issue is reassuring; should the frequency of Islamist complaints increase or become vitriolic, there will be additional cause for concern. End Comment.

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